

The Lexham Bible Dictionary.

BAPTISM (βάπτισμα, *baptisma*). The act of dipping or immersing an object in water as part of a purification ritual. The rite of formal initiation into the Christian church through water. Though several allusions to baptism exist in the Old Testament, baptism is primarily a New Testament concept.

Introduction

Since its origins in Jewish religious life, Christian baptism has continued to serve as a symbol of passing from death into life through Christ's resurrection, and the church has continued to contemplate the paradoxical mystery and concreteness of the practice. Baptism began as a ritual to initiate new believers into the Jewish religion and continued to serve as a purifying mechanism in Jewish religious life. After the time of John the Baptist, baptism took on a slightly different meaning, as it signified turning from death to life through the power of Christ's death and resurrection. Over time, the apostles and early church fathers developed this doctrine further, and the practice began to take on new meaning for different communities of faith throughout the centuries.

Etymology

The term "baptism" derives from the Greek term "to baptize" (βαπτίζω, *baptizō*), which can refer to either the forgiveness of sins or mundane purification before eating meals (Luke 11:38). The related word "washing" or "baptizing" (βαπτισμός, *baptismos*) refers to the act of dipping or immersing an object in water as part of a purification ritual.

Baptism in the Old Testament

Pentateuch. The use of water as a religious and physical cleansing instrument is prevalent throughout the Pentateuch. Those who had committed certain unclean offenses were required to immerse themselves in water in order to ritually purify the body. Examples of such offenses include:

- Touching a corpse (Num 19:10–13; 31:23–24; Lev 11, 22:4–6)
- Eating or picking up a dead animal (Lev 17:15)
- Nocturnal and seminal discharges (Lev 15:6–8, 11–12, 13, 16)
- Coming into contact with a menstruating woman's items (Lev 15:21–22, 25–27)
- Contagious skin infections (Lev 14:8–9)

Beyond these cleansing rituals, several other cleansing practices were required in order to partake of eating sacrificed animals (Lev 8:19–21) and temple worship (Lev 15:31). Certain impurities could be only removed by using running water (Lev 14:5–6, 50–52; 15:13; Deut 21:4).

Second Temple Judaism. Gentiles who converted to Judaism from paganism partook of baptism as entry into the Jewish community, and Jews sometimes used immersions as acts of repentance. The purpose of this entry requirement, known as proselyte baptism, was to remove any hint of ceremonial uncleanness from the Gentile (b. Yebam 46a–48b; b. *Gerim* 60a–61b). Gentiles were considered spiritually and ritually unclean and needed

purification in order to enter Israel and the temple (Josephus, Wars, 2:150; Philo, Legat., 212; Acts 10:28). Ritual cleansing for Jews was symbolic of inward cleansing, as “one who has become a proselyte is like a child newly born” (b. Yebam, 48b).

Apart from proselyte baptism, Jews used immersions as acts of repentance (T. Levi 2:3 B1–2). The group at Qumran participated frequently in water purification rituals. They considered immersions spiritually ineffective if not accompanied by sincere repentance and “humble submission ... to all the precepts of God” (1QS 3:3–9).

Baptism in the New Testament

The Baptism of John. John the Baptist preached a message of repentance and baptism. He was called the “Immerser” (βαπτιστής, *baptistēs*; Matt 16:14; Mark 8:28; Luke 9:19) and the “Baptizer” (βαπτίζων, *baptizōn*; Mark 1:4, 6:14, 24). His baptism possessed a distinctly eschatological flavor as he served to prepare the way for the Messiah (Matt 3:3, 11:10; Mark 1:1–3; John 1:23; compare Isa 40:3; Mal 3:1). In the teaching that accompanied his baptisms, John thoroughly relied on the eschatological language of Mal 3–4, including:

- the messenger of God (Mal 3:1–5)
- cleansing by fire (Mal 3:2–4)
- turning toward God after sins committed against Him and others (Mal 3:5, 8–9)
- burning (Mal 4:1)
- Elijah’s coming before the day of judgment (Mal 4:5)

However, the purpose of John’s baptism was not to usher people into a messianic community; rather, his purpose was to awaken the Jewish people to the reality of the coming Messiah. John’s baptism was a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4 ESV). For John, Jewish ethnicity was not a prerequisite to salvation or a relationship with God.

Josephus refers to John as “a good man” who “had urged the Jews to exert themselves to virtue, both as to justice toward one another and reverence toward God, and having done so join together in washing” (Antiquities, 18:116). He also mentions that John’s baptism, while an outward symbol, was a purification ritual that took place only when “the soul had been cleansed already by righteousness” (Ant. 18:116–117).

John’s Baptism of Jesus. The Gospels of Matthew and Mark provide a detailed account of Jesus’ baptism, while Luke and John mention the event briefly (Matt 3:13–17; Mark 1:9–11; 3:21–22; Luke 3:21–22; John 1:29–34). In all of these accounts, the authors connect John’s baptism of Jesus with the anointing of Jesus by the Holy Spirit and a declaration of Jesus’ sonship. The event served as the inauguration of Jesus’ ministry on earth and a validation of John’s ministry.

Early Christian writers found the event to be discomfiting, however. For example, Justin Martyr believed that Jesus was baptized “solely for the sake of humanity” (Dialogue with Trypho, 88). Ignatius of Antioch believed that Jesus was immersed not for personal purification, but for the purification of the water (Letter to the Ephesians, 18:2). These views are foreign to the text, as Matt 3:15 states that the purpose of Jesus’ baptism is to “fulfill all righteousness.” Matthew used righteousness language to describe the act of obedience to the commandments of God (Przybylski, *Righteousness in Matthew*). In this way, the purpose of Jesus’ baptism was to demonstrate His obedience

to God's will.

The Synoptic Gospels. As baptism was primarily a practice of the early church (Pentecost and afterward), the Gospels mention it infrequently outside of references to John the Baptist and Jesus' baptism.

- In Mark 10:38–39 and Luke 12:50, Jesus uses the baptism motif to refer to His coming persecution. In this sense, He uses the baptism motif not to refer to the cleansing ritual, but His impending tribulation.
- In Matt 28:16–20, Jesus commands His disciples to go and baptize all nations. This reference relates to John 3:22–24, as it connects baptism and discipleship.
- In Mark 16:16, Jesus tells His disciples that those who believe and receive baptism will be saved. However, the oldest manuscripts of Mark do not include Mark 16:9–20.

Baptism in Acts. In Acts, there is no systematic description behind the theology and practice of baptism, but several themes exist, including:

- The priority of faith and repentance prior to baptism
- The forgiveness of sins
- The initiation into Christian fellowship
- The impartation of the Holy Spirit

In seeking a replacement for Judas, the remaining 11 apostles sought a candidate who was with Jesus from the time of His baptism (Acts 1:22). After the Pentecost event in Acts 2, baptism became inherently connected with the presence of the Holy Spirit. The presence of the Spirit set Christian baptism apart from Jewish ritual purification practices and further distanced Christianity from Judaism. In Acts 8, it is apparent that the Holy Spirit had not yet descended on all believers, and Peter and John came to Samaria to impart the Holy Spirit on them through the laying on of hands, as they were baptized only “in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 8:16). Similarly, in Acts 19:1–7, Paul baptizes disciples of John the Baptist who were unaware of and had not yet received the Holy Spirit.

Baptism events in Acts demonstrate the belief that baptism is to take place immediately after conversion. For example, in Acts 8:26–39, Phillip baptizes an Ethiopian eunuch (probably a proselyte returning from worship at the temple in Jerusalem) who has just come to faith in Christ through reading the narrative of the Suffering Servant in Isa 53. Likewise, in Acts 9:17–18, Ananias baptized Paul (formerly Saul) after his conversion experience on the road to Damascus.

When Paul is facing trial before King Agrippa (Acts 26:2–23), his speech contains allusions to baptism and repentance; he mentions that his apostolic mission was to open people's eyes so they may turn from darkness to light, from Satan to God, and receive forgiveness of sins and a place among other believers (Acts 26:18). Throughout the text, baptism occurs following conversion:

- After Pentecost and Peter's sermon proclaiming the risen Christ, the apostles immediately baptized those who believed (Acts 2:41).
- In Acts 10, Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian cohort (Acts 10:1), and his entire household are baptized by Peter.

- After the Holy Spirit descended on all the people present for Peter’s sermon (Acts 10:34–43), Peter commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 10:48).
- In Acts 16, Paul and Silas baptize the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:30–33).

Baptism in Paul’s Letters. For Paul, one main purpose of baptism was to counter disunity. Paul emphasizes in his teachings that baptism is to take place “in the name of Jesus.” In 1 Cor 1:12–13, he criticizes the Corinthian church for sectarian devotion to various apostles and leaders: “Each one of you says, ‘I follow Paul,’ or ‘I follow Apollos,’ or ‘I follow Cephas,’ or ‘I follow Christ.’ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” (ESV). For Paul, this form of sectarianism diminished the significance of participating in Christ’s death and resurrection. Through baptism, believers are united with Christ’s death and resurrection and therefore demonstrate that they were created for good works (Eph 2:10).

Paul also speaks of baptism as “putting on Christ.” In Gal 3:26–27, he notes, “For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (ESV). This comes in the context of Paul describing how the children of Abraham are those who put their faith in Christ, not those born of Jewish descent. Paul’s connection between faith and baptism reinforces the view that the two are intricately related and were nearly synonymous in the early church.

The second main purpose of baptism for Paul is its function as an outward manifestation of inward transformation through the death and resurrection of Jesus, inaugurating a new life in obedience to Christ. In Rom 6:4, Paul notes, “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (ESV). This verse encapsulates Paul’s argument that those who have been saved through Christ are dead to sin, and the boundless grace of God should not lead to antinomianism. Similarly, in Col 2:11–12, Paul describes baptism as the physical manifestation of putting to death the work of the flesh and being raised to new life through the death and resurrection of Christ.

Baptism in the General Letters. The General Letters continue to develop the theology and practice of baptism, but themes of forgiveness of sins and the connection between inward faith and outward practice continued to have their place. The book of Hebrews contains two specific references to baptism:

1. Heb 6:1–2, which suggests that a catechetical process preceded baptism—perhaps instruction on “the difference between Christian baptism and other religious absolutions current at the time” (Wainright, “Baptism,” 110). The use of the plural Greek word “washings” (βαπτισμός, *baptismos*) to refer to baptism in Heb 6:2 elucidates this view.
2. Heb 10:22, which notes, “Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water” (ESV).

In 1 Peter, Peter speaks to an audience composed primarily of Gentiles who would have had no understanding of ritual purity. He states, “Baptism . . . now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the

resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 3:21 ESV). For Peter, baptism derives its potency and purpose through the resurrection of Jesus, which enables people to come to faith and receive cleansing from sins.

1 John 5:6–8 may allude to Jesus’ baptism, noting, “This is he who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not by the water only but by the water and the blood . . . For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and these three agree” (ESV). The water and blood referenced here could possibly be referring to Jesus’ baptism and death, respectively, while the Spirit reference probably alludes to the Spirit’s presence on Jesus’ ministry (John 1:32–34). Another possibility is the blood and water that flowed from Jesus’ pierced side during the crucifixion (John 19:34).

Post-Apostolic Developments

After the time of the apostles, the church began to develop the meaning of baptism and instructions regarding its usage and practice. The *Didache* (ca. AD 100), one of the church’s earliest known documents related to Christian theological practice, provides specific instructions for baptism. The instructions of the *Didache* indicate a highly developed liturgy and understanding of baptism over the first century:

- The people receiving baptism (baptizands) were to first recite “all these things” (Didache 7:2), a reference to the ethical teachings of the first six chapters of the *Didache*. This implies that a catechetical process was already underway in the first century of the church’s existence.
- The baptizers and baptizands were to fast before the baptismal event (Didache 7:4).
- “Triune” baptism (baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) in “living” water (a river or stream) was preferred (Didache 7:2). If running water was unavailable, then baptism should take place in “other” cold water (Didache 7:3–4). If none of these options were available, the baptizer should pour water over the baptizand’s head three times in the name in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Didache 7:3).

Two additional texts provide further detail into baptism:

- The *Apostolic Tradition* (traditionally attributed to Hippolytus, ca. AD 200) notes that baptizands were naked and recommends that men and women be separated (Apostolic Tradition 21:9–11).
- The *Apostolic Tradition* also notes that the baptizand would be anointed with oil by a deacon or deaconess, and the elder would anoint the baptizands once more after their baptism (*Apostolic Tradition* 29:19–20).
- The *Didascalia Apostolorum* (ca. AD 230) notes that baptism involved a traditional Trinitarian formula as well as the impartation of the Holy Spirit after baptism (*Didascalia Apostolorum* 3:12).

The *Epistle of Barnabas* (ca. AD 70–130) contains a discussion of baptism that offers insights into the theological interpretation of baptism in the early church. The author argues that the Jewish people have interpreted the Mosaic laws too literally, suggesting “an allegorical interpretation of the Old Testament” instead. He argues that Jews do not possess a baptism for the remission of sins like Christians possess (Barnabas, 11:1). The author quotes Psa 1, and Ezek 47:12, and several passages in Isaiah (Isa 16:1–2; 45:2–3;

33:16–18) that use water imagery, implying that these verses do not merit literal interpretation, but rather are foreshadowing references to baptism (Stander and Louw, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 37).

Barnabas also uses language of “going down” into the water and “coming up” out of the water (Barnabas, 11:8, 11), indicating that immersion was the preferred mode of baptism. While this reference could simply mean that the baptizands descended and ascended from the banks of rivers or streams, other references in early Christian literature generally use this language to refer to immersion (Stander and Louw, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 37). The author concludes chapter 11 by noting that when we are baptized, “we go down into the water laden with sins and filth, and rise up from it bearing fruit in the heart, resting our fear and hope on Jesus in the spirit” (11:11). These words indicate the symbolic nature of baptism—that it is an outward, visible sign of inward spiritual transformation.

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